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Hope, Healing, and “Happy Hands”: Gardner-Webb Students Pursue Missions at Home and Abroad

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Office of University Communications

May 2, 2012

Recently, six spring break mission teams and 71 team members put Gardner-Webb’s core values of faith, service and leadership into action across the globe. These are their stories —of hope, healing, and “Happy Hands.” To skip to an individual story, click on the name of the trip’s location here: Tegucigalpa, Honduras; Jinotega, Nicaragua; Bucharest, Romania; Shelby, N.C.; Fortaleza, Brazil; and Lake Providence, La.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras
Jinotega, Nicaragua
Bucharest, Romania Mission Trip
Shelby, N.C.
Fortaleza, Brazil
Lake Providence, Louisiana

Tegucigalpa, Honduras

One team of five American Sign Language students, an ASL professor, and a Noel Program interpreter traveled for the second time in three years to Tegucigalpa, Honduras, where they partnered with New Life Deaf Ministry’s (NLDM) Happy Hands School for the Deaf.

The team’s primary task was to offer Vacation Bible School events for deaf children from preschool through 7th grade, sharing key Bible stories that emphasize God’s love for his children. As senior ASL major Rebecca Priest explained, though, teaching God’s love wasn’t nearly as easy as she’d anticipated.

“Some of the older children already had a significant foundation in Honduran Sign Language, but many of the preschool children had absolutely no language, because their parents didn’t understand how to communicate with them. They didn’t even know their names. We just kept thinking, how do we teach kids who don’t even know their own names that God loves them? If they have no language, how do they even know there is a God, or begin to understand the concept of God?”

But as Priest discovered, God works in mysterious ways. “We had no idea they were working through a unit on colors, learning the signs for blue and yellow and green. The lesson we had planned to teach just happened to be on Joseph and the coat of many colors! That’s totally a God thing,” she said.

The team also made two home visits, reaching out to the parents of deaf children and inviting them to come back to the school. "As it turns out," said team leader Rachel Buck, who will be leaving GWU in June to start a two-year missions commitment with NLDM, "the first child we saw that Monday was one of the boys we'd visited the day before. That just melted all of our hearts in the best way."

Trip leader Bob Moore, a professor of American Sign Language at GWU, also led several workshops for the teachers on how to teach creative and critical thinking, and even led workshops for NLDM's Deaf Leadership Team on the procedures of Bible translation, since the Honduran deaf community is launching a several-year-long process to translate the Bible into Honduran Sign Language.

Moore, who visited NLDM ten years ago before the Happy Hands School was started, said it was inspiring to see the mission's progress. "The deaf community in Tegucigalpa is acting like a beacon and a shining light for the other deaf in the country," said Moore. "It's wonderful to see."

Jinotega, Nicaragua

The nursing program's goal for students is to educate them "with a cultural and global perspective seated in a Christian heritage." In an effort to fulfill this mission, they put together two mission trips over spring break for nursing students. One of the trips was to Jinotega, Nicaragua. So, 27 students, 2 faculty members and the former Mayor of Shelby, Ted Alexander, spent spring break in Nicaragua.

The week in Nicaragua was absolutely packed. On the medical side of things, the team conducted vision and blood pressure screenings, donated approximately two tons of supplies, and taught CPR to community members. In the vision screening alone, they saw over 350 people and they were able to provide glasses for those that needed them. They also worked with local churches, played with kids, and organized a showing of the Christian film, "Courageous."

While the team faced their fair share of challenges, such as the language barrier, sickness and not having enough time, students say that God's faithfulness and provision was made evident time after time in Jinotega. Over 117 Nicaraguans accepted Christ. God provided all the right supplies at the right time for an emergency medical situation. Student led devotions were powerful and moving. The stories keep coming and coming.

The Nicaraguans were not the only ones who had life changing experiences that week. The students who went say that they left a little bit of their hearts in Nicaragua. "We didn't have enough time," said Tara Roberts, a junior in the nursing program. "I'm ready to go back."

Bucharest, Romania Mission Trip

Eleven other nursing students, a retired nurse, a nurse practitioner and three GWU faculty members packed up their bags and headed to Romania. The team primarily worked in Glina, a Roma (Gypsy) village on the outskirts of Bucharest, providing healthcare clinics for the villagers and students at the Ruth School.

While there, they were able to assess weight, blood pressure, vision, hearing, head lice and blood sugar for 170 children and 140 adults. They also taught hygiene skills, helped with a sewing product, distributed home and hygiene supplies, and participated in several church and chapel services.

Interacting with the Romanian people was the highlight of the trip for most of the team. Even though they faced a language barrier, there was a real connection between the mission team, the interpreters, and the villagers. Carole Reed, a student in the nursing program, said, "Not only did God use us to make an impact in lives of the people we worked with, but I'm sure the team would agree with my saying that the people made an even more profound impact on our lives."

Shelby, N.C.

Six devoted students decided to spend spring break in the Cleveland County area, installing ceiling tiles and doing various handiwork projects at the North Carolina Baptist Men's Association mission center. They also purchased and donated some needed tools and equipment to the facility.

During the five days, the group helped organize the center's clothing and food pantry to assist the staff in distributing those much-needed items around the community. They also went to one of the local nursing homes and played bingo with the elderly.

This was only a five-day trip but for some, that wasn't long enough. "I could have gone longer because I truly enjoyed the work," said Tyler Davis, one of the team's leaders and the office manager for housing and residence education at GWU.

While this trip helped the Baptist Men, it also proved that missions can be done close to home. "The chance to serve in our own community was an awesome experience," remarked Davis. "Being able to go and serve in a facility where other missionaries are going to serve was just awesome."

Team member and GWU junior Adam Barnes believes that missions starts at home. "The mindset that missions is exclusively international is discouraging. Everyone needs to know God's love no matter where it is. It's our job as Christians to make people aware of ways this can happen."

Barnes also hopes that this is just the start of a local missions focus in the Cleveland County area. "I hope that this trip is the spring board for Christian Life and Service trips not just during spring break but all throughout the year."

Fortaleza, Brazil

One group of students chose to travel around the world to spend quality time with the 60 children at the Davis Lar Children's Home in Fortaleza, Brazil. Every spring break trip is special, but this one was especially unique because of an awesome Gardner-Webb connection. The directors of the home are the parents of Gardner-Webb sophomore Matt Anderson.

While there, the group completed several construction projects for "the Lar," taught children's church and even traveled into an impoverished neighborhood to share a Bible lesson with the children in the community. When they weren't working on construction or teaching, they were spending quality time with the children.

"It was incredible," said GWU sophomore Haley Sieber of the opportunity to serve the children. "One of the kids was like the sister I never had. I expected to love on the kids, but they loved on us. They just had so much love to give."

Of course, the team did experience some of the typical challenges associated with mission trips, like diet adjustments, stomach sickness, or adjusting to the number of flies. But Sieber said the sacrifices were definitely worth it. "If anyone is thinking of going on a mission trip, I encourage them to go. You'll make an impact on those you're serving, but I guarantee they'll make a larger impact on you."

Lake Providence, Louisiana

Graduate students Andrew Woods and Rebekah Stanford led a team of seven students on a service trip to Lake Providence, La., to work alongside a missionary who has devoted her life to meeting the needs of the Lake Providence community. They spent most of their time doing construction work, helping transform the missionary's house into a facility to host larger male and female teams, and painting and siding another local woman's house.

Speaking of the missionary they served alongside, Woods said, "All she does is give to other people, and pour into others. She never takes a side, never picks a team, so to speak. She just loves and serves everyone in that community equally. I have immense respect for her, and I think she enjoyed the opportunity to relax and share her experiences with a group of her peers in ministry."

The team also visited a non-denominational church whose worship style was “extremely charismatic,” an “outside the comfort zone” experience for most of his team. “Even that was incredible, to watch them be uncomfortable at first, but then to come to understand that these people love God, and that they’re worth getting to know.” The church embraced the Gardner-Webb team, and Woods said he imagines they felt “validated in their faith by our group’s willingness to come in and worship alongside them.”

Woods said it was particularly rewarding to watch his team develop deep relationships with one another as the week progressed. “We had an introverted team, but it was amazing to watch how we grew together throughout the week,” he said.

Woods and Stanford challenged their team to share stories of moments of true spiritual importance or revelation in their lives, formative moments that had helped shape their Christian journeys.

“As the week went along,” Woods said, “our team became more and more vulnerable with one another. It’s an amazing truth of the human experience that when people become vulnerable, you want to help them, you want to be with them and comfort them. Even when fundamental ideologies come into conflict, the power of authenticity and vulnerability can make people leave behind for a moment the most rigid political stance or philosophical view, and just be human with one another. That’s a beautiful thing to watch.”

Ultimately, Woods said he hopes the experience not only did a lot of good for the Lake Providence community, but left the GWU team feeling more spiritually self-aware. “I hope our team members understand their faith more deeply, and look at their relationships with others a little differently too as a result. I hope they left with more confidence in who they are and where they are in their faith.”

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Communications interns Travis Sherrill and Jeanie Groh contributed writing and reporting.